

Indiana State Museum

Educational Opportunities for Students

James Whitcomb Riley

“The Hoosier Poet”



Lesson Plan
Text, Activities and Resources
Grades 9-12

James Whitcomb Riley: “The Hoosier Poet”

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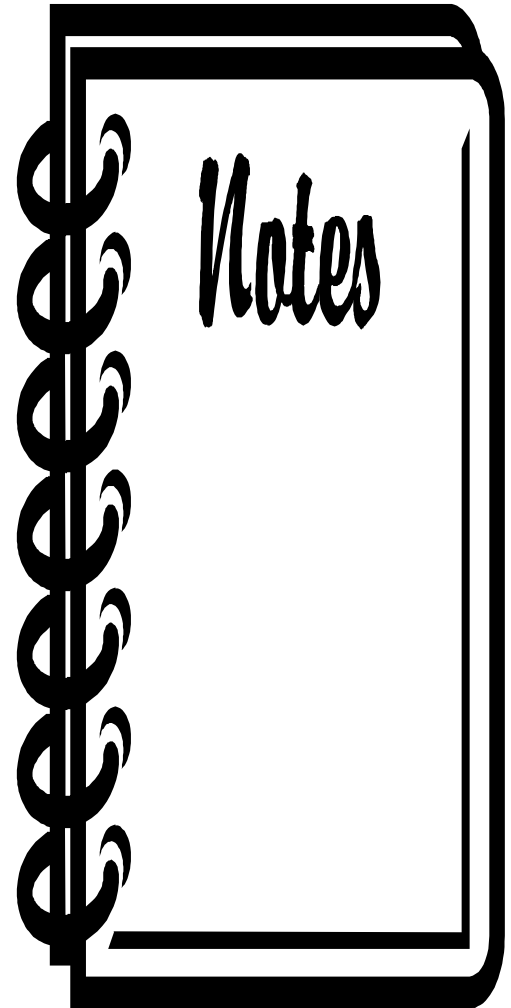
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INTRODUCTION

This lesson plan incorporates oral and written language, reading, vocabulary development, social studies and critical thinking. The lessons contained in this packet are intended for grades 9 - 12. The activities are designed to be innovative and to meet Indiana Academic Standards. The text is suitable for high school students and may be reproduced and distributed.

SETTING THE STAGE

To begin the lesson plan, you might want to introduce your class to age-appropriate poetry from different authors and time periods: Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, William Shakespeare, Edna St. Vincent Milay, etc. Students should be encouraged to read poetry aloud. James Whitcomb Riley can fit nicely into units and lessons dealing with poetry, writing and literature, Indiana history, the Victorian and Progressive Eras, and popular culture (don’t forget – Riley was one of the most popular writers in the world in a day when much of the educated public read poetry regularly).



James Whitcomb Riley: “The Hoosier Poet”

From the vantage point of the early 21st century, it is difficult to think of Indiana as a hotbed of popular literature. During the past hundred years, however, many Hoosier authors have achieved great public acclaim: Theodore Dreiser, Kurt Vonnegut, and Booth Tarkington, among many others, all met with great popular and critical success. Easily the most commercially popular in his day was the man who became known worldwide as “The Hoosier Poet,” James Whitcomb Riley.

Riley’s popularity during his lifetime was astonishing. Booked into concert halls on the lecture and reading circuits, Riley read his poetry to sold-out crowds all over the United States. He was a regular dinner guest of presidents, artists and socialites. His 63rd birthday, in 1912, was celebrated in public schools all across the nation, and when he died, just 4 years later, 35,000 people filed past his body where it lay in state under the dome of the Indiana Statehouse.

Riley’s childhood and youth, indeed his early adulthood, gave no indication that he would ever be noticed for anything. He was born on October 7, 1849 in Greenfield, Indiana. His father, Reuben, was a successful small town lawyer who had been Greenfield’s first mayor and hoped that young Jim would follow in his footsteps into the practice of law. Elizabeth, his mother, provided some early artistic encouragement by exposing him to poetry, including her own.

He was also exposed to a wealth of interesting stimuli by virtue of his Greenfield childhood. Greenfield was at once a typical small Indiana town of the mid-19th century – primarily rural, surrounded by woods and burgeoning agriculture – and a station along the National Road, the most heavily traveled road in Indiana at the time. Since it was planked, it also was one of the state’s *better* roads. Travelers, settlers and goods coming into Indianapolis or headed to points farther west all passed through Greenfield and, since they had built a new two-story home along the road, the Rileys’ front yard.

Riley’s childhood, or at the least his idealized memories of it, would supply him with most of the raw material for his later poetry. He was an indifferent student, far more interested in spending time out doors playing, fishing, swimming or wandering in the woods than in his studies. He would mine these boyhood activities and pursuits again and again in his adult work.

Too, Riley took to accompanying his father to the courthouse where he was exposed to the wealth of speech patterns and dialects spoken by the locals, Hoosiers both born and transplanted. It was later argued persuasively by scholars and linguists that no one had ever truly spoken in the patterns, cadences, vocabulary and syntax that Riley gave his literary characters, but certainly he recognized early in life that people do not speak in accordance to the rules of grammar and proper pronunciation (or spellings). Future characters like the “Raggedy Man” were almost certainly born in James’ childhood encounters with his small town neighbors.

Mary Alice Smith made a significant impression on young Jim. She was an orphan who came to work and board with the Rileys during James’ youth and became the inspiration for his best-known character, Little Orphant Annie. Smith well outlived Riley and there exists a charming photo of Mary Alice as an elderly woman with an impish grin sitting in an old wicker rocking chair. She looks perfectly capable of happily scaring the wits out of little Jimmy with tales of the “gobble’uns.”

Leaving school at age 16, Riley spent several months reading the law in his father’s office, but it was clear to all that his heart was not in the courtroom. He broke off from those studies and spent the next several years moving from job to job, primarily as a sign painter. He eventually hired on painting advertisements for a traveling “wagon show,” a type of precursor to the vaudeville circuit. It

was here that his talent for versifying began to show itself, as he started writing lyrics for topical songs to be sung in performances. It is speculated that here, too, he began to hone a gift for theatrical performance that would mark his future readings.

Tiring of the aimless moving about of an itinerant painter, Riley returned to Greenfield and began working as a newspaper reporter and submitting poems to local and regional publications in earnest. Newspapers of the day published a great deal of poetry and prose fiction, and Riley found a ready market for his early work, most of which was published under the pen name of "Jay Whit." In 1877, while writing for a paper in Anderson, Indiana, he achieved his first taste of notoriety, if of an infamous type.

Attempting to prove a point that reputation was more important than merit in the literary world, he composed a poem, "Leonainie," in the style of Edgar Allen Poe, signed it with the late poet's initials, and submitted it to a newspaper in Kokomo, Indiana, along with a letter claiming to have found the manuscript in the flyleaf of a second-hand dictionary. The poem caused a great sensation in the literary press and was widely praised by critics and scholars. Feeling guilty about the ruse, and perhaps a little anxious to make his point public, Riley admitted to the hoax. Humorously, some critics refused to believe him and continued to attribute the poem to Poe. Riley, in any case, was immediately offered a job at a larger newspaper in Indianapolis where, upon acceptance, he settled for the rest of his life.

Riley's first book of poems, *The Ole Swimmin' Hole an' 'Leven More Poems*, was drawn from poems he had written over the years for various newspapers. The book, like his earlier poems, appeared under a pen name, this time "Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone." Riley's use of dialect and first-person rural persona were already well established. No commercial publisher was interested in the book, so Riley published it himself, along with his newspaper editor, in 1883. They both profited handsomely when the book sold out almost immediately. Riley would never again want for a publisher.

Riley's popularity was established virtually overnight. His America faced rapid industrialization, tremendous urban growth and a steady influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia, that is, people unlike the predominantly Irish and German immigrants of the generations before. Alongside these was a mass migration of southern, rural blacks into northern urban areas. It was a period of great social and economic change. In Indiana alone, Riley's writing career spanned the precise years in which the state moved from a mostly rural population with an overwhelmingly agricultural economy to largely urban-based manufacturing economy.

Many people were overwhelmed by such change. Such people found Riley's work a balm and a panacea. His poetry of a gentle, small town world where everyone was humble, happy and entertaining struck a chord in the hearts of a people increasingly surrounded by strangers. His simple tales of idyllic childhood and folksy humor and wisdom were comforting to people whose lives seemed ever more complex and confusing.

At the same time, Riley himself was clearly a man of the world. On his first public reading tour, the curious came to see the talented bumpkin responsible for such amusing, homespun humor and pathos. They were shocked to find a dapper little man, immaculately dressed, possessed of a dry wit and urbane manner. Though he celebrated the humble and unlettered, he was clearly not entirely of them. Riley moved easily in society and he was welcome in the homes of the wealthy, powerful and fashionable, people with whom his characters would never have mixed.

In 1893, Riley became a permanent paying guest in the Indianapolis home of Maj. Charles L. Holstein, in the fashionable Lockerbie Street area, where he was to live the remainder of his life. In continual demand on the reading and lecture circuits, he was away a good deal until his later years. The author of paeans to the simple pleasures of home, family and childhood innocence, he never owned his own home, never married, never had children.

He had a great deal of contact with children, though. The Lockerbie home became a Mecca for small, starched children brought around to be photographed on the knees or at the feet of “The Hoosier Poet.” Riley was known, too, to arrive unannounced at Indianapolis elementary schools and recite his poems to happily surprised classrooms full of students, teachers and administrators. And by all accounts, he was a marvelous reader, able to elicit laughter or tears with his dramatic interpretations of his own work, regardless of the age of his audience. School children or avid theatergoers, his contemporaries reported that he could hold virtually any group spellbound. No less than William Dean Howells and Mark Twain were among his admirers.

And they were hardly alone. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, Riley was one of the best known and best selling authors in the United States, and around the world. He was given honorary degrees by major universities and memberships in arts and literary societies. For much of the world, James Whitcomb Riley and his work *were* Indiana. Rarely has an individual so defined and embodied in the public mind a region and its people. Unlike the proverbial prophet rejected in his own land, Indiana embraced Riley with an almost religious fervor. He became, in his lifetime, an icon for “Hoosier.” Within a few short years of his death, in the summer of 1916, both the Lockerbie Street house and his childhood home in Greenfield were memorials. Almost 90 years later, both still welcome a steady stream of Indiana school children and the general public on a daily basis.

Today, Riley is more remembered than read, his popular reputation resting primarily on a handful of well-loved poems read to children at bedtime or on special occasions, except in Indiana, where he is still revered by a large segment of the population. His work remains in print and readily available in most libraries and bookshops, but he is no longer widely read or discussed. Though he had, and still has, staunch defenders, his work was never widely critically acclaimed, one modern commentator going so far as to write, “Often his writing has been cited as showing how low public taste can sink.”

This assessment seems a bit harsh. Riley wrote not for academics or the literati, but for common people, for many whom his work was their first or only brush with poetry. He wrote in dialect and common vernacular on purpose. If his humor and pathos sometimes seem hokey and old-fashioned, he was writing one hundred years ago, in a very different world. Nonetheless, his best work is still vital and enjoyable and speaks across the years to a yearning and nostalgia for a quieter and simpler time when little boys and girls played happily in the woods and fields, neighbors looked after one another, and

“that a man who does about the best he can
Is plenty good enough to suit.”

More at a Click

Here are two sites that feature James Whitcomb Riley’s poems to print or download:

www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/authors/riley.html

www.underthesun.cc/Classics/Riley/jwr/jwr1.html

Here is a site that features poems for and about kids:

www.ece.ucdavis.edu/~darsie/kid_poems.html

Here are a couple of sites that offer suggestions, ideas and lessons for teaching poetry:

www.pbs.org.wnet.foolingwithwords

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/>



V O C A B U L A R Y

Cadence: the rhythm, flow and inflection of language, especially as spoken or sung. In Riley's poems, this can refer to both the rhythm of his poems or the way his characters speak.

Dialect: variation, or a group of variations, in language use common to a region or group of persons; differences in vocabulary, grammar and punctuation from "proper" language use. Riley wrote many poems in dialect, that is, the way people spoke rather than in "proper" English.

Icon: an image or symbol, often that represents a larger or more complex idea.

Idyllic: charming and ideal, usually related to nature.

Itinerant: traveling from place to place, especially looking for work. When Riley traveled from town to town looking for sign painting jobs, he was 'itinerant' rather than someone with one, steady job.

Nostalgia: a fond longing for the past; the desire for 'the way things used to be.'

Pen name: a false name used by an author to hide her/his identity for some reason. Also called a "pseudonym." Riley published many of his early poems under the name "Jay Whit."

Planked road: a dirt road covered with thick, wooden boards to let horses and wagons travel more easily. Many of Indiana's early roads were planked.

Syntax: the order in which a sentence or phrase is written or spoken.

F U N F A C T S

Fun Facts about James Whitcomb Riley

In his youth, Riley hoped to be a concert violinist, but his would-be career was cut short by a thumb injury that hindered his playing.

Riley developed into quite a good artist and continued to draw and paint, very well, long after his sign-painting days were over.

Riley was named for the early Indiana Governor, James Whitcomb, who served in office from 1843 to 1848.

Riley's childhood nickname was "Bud," and he was the third of six children.

One of Riley's friends in Indianapolis was the painter T.C. Steele, who painted a well-known portrait of the poet.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Grades: 9 - 12

Subject: James Whitcomb Riley

Activity 1

Objectives

- ❑ Students will examine the use of dialect and colloquialism in literary work.
- ❑ Students will practice reading poetry aloud.

Indiana's Academic Standards

English/ Language Arts: 9.3.4, 9.3.7, 9.3.8, 9.3.9, 9.3.10, 9.3.12, 9.7.1, 9.7.10, 9.7.17; 10.1.2, 10.3.4, 10.3.5, 10.3.7, 10.3.8, 10.3.9, 10.3.11, 10.7.10, 10.7.17; 11.2.2, 11.3.1, 11.3.4, 11.3.5, 11.7.18, 11.7.20; 12.3.1, 12.3.3, 12.7.12, 12.7.18, 12.7.20

Supplies:

Background text

Examples of Riley's dialect poems

Instructions:

1. One of the most notable aspects of James Whitcomb Riley's poetry was his regular use of dialect and the syntax of common speech. In short, he tried to write the way people speak, including spelling words the way they sound when spoken. His dialects often sound odd to us today because they reproduce speech patterns and pronunciations common 150 years ago, but virtually extinct now.
2. Choose one of Riley's dialectic poems and have different students read each stanza aloud. It can take several times through before you get the hang of it. Even then, some words may seem like a foreign language, but it is fun to try and to listen to. (Note: many scholars and historians have argued that the speech patterns Riley wrote in never really existed in the form he used for his poems.)

Activity 2

Objectives

- ❑ Students will examine differences between written and spoken language patterns.
- ❑ Students will create an oral history.

Indiana's Academic Standards

Social Studies: USH 9.1

English/ Language Arts: 9.7.19; 10.7.19; 11.7.20; 12.7.20

Supplies:

Audio tape recording device

Tapes

Writing materials

Instructions:

1. Make short, audio recordings of students talking about their grandparents or some memories of their childhood.

2. Play the recordings back to the class and have students write out what was said in dialect, using phonetic spellings (such as ‘gonna,’ ‘wanna,’ ‘goin’ ta’ and so forth) and punctuating according to the spoken syntax rather than grammatical rules.
3. When these are written out, shuffle the transcriptions and pass them out randomly, then have students read each other’s aloud, again in dialect, as it is written down.
4. Time permitting, have students discuss what the memories they chose to talk about might tell someone hundred years from now about their lives today. Do they think that the lives of high school students will be radically different in on hundred years?

Activity 3

Objectives

- ❑ Students will examine the use of dialect and colloquialism in literary work.
- ❑ Students will practice reading poetry aloud.

Indiana’s Academic Standards

English/ Language Arts: 9.3.4, 9.3.7, 9.3.8, 9.3.9, 9.3.10, 9.3.12, 9.7.1, 9.7.10, 9.7.17; 10.1.2, 10.3.4, 10.3.5, 10.3.7, 10.3.8, 10.3.9, 10.3.11, 10.7.10, 10.7.17; 11.2.2, 11.3.1, 11.3.4, 11.3.5, 11.7.18, 11.7.20; 12.3.1, 12.3.3, 12.7.12, 12.7.18, 12.7.20

Supplies:

Examples of Riley’s dialect poems
Writing materials

Instructions:

1. Chose one of Riley’s dialect poems (it can be the one used in the first exercise) and translate it into modern, ‘proper’ English. This should be a literal line-by-line translation without regard to rhyming or meter. Have both the poem and the translation read aloud; compare the two.

Further Activities

I HATE THIS!

Many, some days most, students hate writing, and poetry writing most of all. Make this a virtue. Ask students what they think of being assigned to write a poem. Let them talk about how much they like or dislike it and don’t discourage the negative responses. Nearly all creative writing requires some self-disclosure. Instead, turn the tables and have them write a poem about how much they hate writing poetry and why. Many will probably be humorous and filled with hyperbole. Have them read aloud. Of course, students who *like* to write can write about that, too.

I’ve Told You a Thousand Times Not to Exaggerate!

Speaking of hyperbole, one way to get students to begin to think in images is to have them think in terms of exaggeration. “His feet are so big that...The sun was so hot that...Her laughter is so loud that...” Students can fill in the blanks with images that are spontaneous, silly, serious, alliterative. They can lead to ways of expressing or thinking about things that are new and stimulating. Many kids (and adults, too) labor under the assumption that poetry is all about feelings and emotions. While there are many poems that do, many others, and many great ones, are not at all about anyone’s innermost dreams or fears – they are about, well, anything at all.

Evaluation

A point scale can evaluate student's work during lessons. Teachers also can custom-design an evaluation that could include observation, a numeric rating scale and/or class discussion.

Student Evaluation: Grades 3-6

Tell the students the word *evaluate* means to weigh, to judge, or to determine the value of something. The most important evaluator is the student himself or herself. Give each student a copy of the "I LEARNED..." Questions with each activity. Instruct them to turn their answers to the questions in with the assignment. Together, as a class, go over their questions and answers, discussing how the answers to these questions could help students judge the quality of their own work, and improve it.

“I LEARNED...” QUESTIONS

Name _____ **Date** _____

1. What were you expected to do for this assignment?

2. In this assignment, what did you do well?

3. If you had to do this assignment over, what would you do differently?

4. What help do you need from me?

LESSON PLAN EVALUATION

Your feedback is important to us. We welcome your comments to help us plan lessons in the future. Please check your responses and return to the Indiana State Museum. You may return the evaluation by mail, fax, or e-mail to:

Attention: Teacher and Student Program Coordinator, ssteinem@dnr.state.in.us

Fax 317.233.8268

1. Please indicate the lesson plan you received:

- ☐ James Whitcomb Riley
- ☐ Madam C. J. Walker
- ☐ Young Abraham Lincoln
- ☐ The Anti-Slavery Movement
- ☐ Modes of Transportation
- ☐ Quilts
- ☐ Civil War Booklet
- ☐ Amish of Indiana
- ☐ Oliver P. Morton

1. Did you find the lesson plan easy to understand and use?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

If "no," what was the problem? _____

2. Were the connections to the state standards appropriate?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

Comments: _____

3. Was the length of this lesson plan

too short? ____ too long? ____ just right? ____

Comments: _____

4. Was the lesson plan appropriate for the grade/ability level of your students?

Yes ____ No ____ Not sure ____

Comments: _____

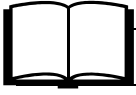
5. What activity did your students like the best? _____

6. What activity did your student like the least? _____

Why? _____

How could we improve it? _____

Additional comments: _____



RESOURCES

Books

Works by Riley

Manlove, Donald C., ed., *The Best of James Whitcomb Riley*.

Riley, James Whitcomb, *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley*.

-----, *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*.

-----, *Little Orphant Annie and other Poetical Works*.

-----, *Love Letters of a Batchelor Poet*.

Works about Riley

Shumacker, Arthur W., *A History of Indiana Literature*.

Van Allen, Elizabeth J., *James Whitcomb Riley: A Life*.

Web sites

James Whitcomb Riley On-line exhibit from the Indiana University Lilly Library
www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/riley/exhibit.htm

Riley correspondence and links at the Indiana Historical Society
www.indianahistory.org/heritage/botts.html

Dedicated Riley site with biographical information. **NOTE:** Contains links to Christian religious sites.
www.jameswhitcombriley.com

Riley home and museum in Greenfield, IN
www.greenfieldin.org/parks/rileyhouse.htm

Lockerbie home of the Holstein's (Riley Home)
ideanet.doe.state.in.us/~cdahncke/PAGE1.html

More Riley Resources

Places To Go:

James Whitcomb Riley Birthplace and Museum
250 West Main St.
Greenfield, IN 46140
317.462.8539

James Whitcomb Riley Lockerbie Street Home
528 Lockerbie St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317.631.5885

Things To See:

Indiana Historical Society
450 W. Ohio St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
317.232.1882
Features collections of Riley's letters